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PRACTICAL EFFORTS AT CHARACTER BUILDING FOR JAIL PRISONERS

PRESENTED AT
THE FIFTY-FIRST CONGRESS
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JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA, 1921

By
J. F. WRIGHT
EXECUTIVE SECRETARY, PATHFINDERS OF AMERICA,
DETROIT, MICHIGAN

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PRACTICAL EFFORTS AT CHARACTER BUILDING FOR JAIL PRISONERS

By J. F. WRIGHT

Executive Secretary, Pathfinders of America, Detroit, Michigan

To sympathize with the criminal, but not condone the crime, is neither "mushy sentimentalism" nor a "pink tea program"; it is humanism, and the man who cannot maintain this attitude of mind is not only missing the joy of living but is piling up trouble for himself and posterity. Neither can he rightfully claim to be a follower of the lowly Nazarene.

When any nation spends eight times as much money annually, in a farcical contest with vice and crime, as it costs to run that government—as is the case in the United States today—the criminal problem becomes a national question of vital importance; and as long as our prison system is fed by over one million arrests each year, no boy or girl is immune from its sting, and it becomes a local question very close to your fireside and mine.

There are two aspects to this problem that has divided society—the economical and the humane—and while an intelligent discussion of either inevitably leads to the same conclusion, I shall endeavor to convince you, in the few moments at my disposal, that in dividing the subject we are not only trying to purify a polluted stream at its mouth instead of at its source, but are dividing our forces that should be concentrated on constructive rather than corrective measures.

The economical phase of the problem represents the material interest, while the humane phase represents the spiritual side of the question, or that primordial energy in man so divinely organized as to permit of no distinction between nationality, color, tongue, or creed, and which is the basis of all mental, moral, and intellectual development of the human race.

The economical phase of the problem is represented by the

effort of our courts to make the penalty fit the crime, and our prison system to measure out punishment to fit both the crime and the criminal, without any reference to, or consideration of, the humane side of the problem.

When I learn of sentences passed by judges who were formerly prosecuting attorneys, I heartily agree with John Alan Hamilton when he says: "Some judges assume the position of public avenger rather than protectors of society," and I wonder if their previous experience has not disqualified them to administer justice with mercy.

When one judge sentenced two boys aged eighteen and twenty years to solitary confinement at hard labor for life, and I wrote asking the judge if I might correspond with the boys, he replied that he did not know the prison rules, but advised me to write to the warden.

This experience convinced me that before any man should be allowed to sit on the bench as a judge, he should be required to spend one week in the county jail, then the same time in each prison to which he would have the authority to send men—not as a guest of the prison official in the front office, but in the jail or prison as an inmate, donning the prison garb, occupying a prisoner's cell, with his meals, bath, exercise, and every privilege furnished him at the sound of a bell, so he will not be permitted to exercise reason, initiative, or any personal responsibility; eat his meals from a tin plate, have a man stand over him with a gun while he takes his exercise, and have all visible means of support taken from his family while he is in prison. I wonder if society would not hasten the solution of the prison problem if such a course were demanded.

The first mistake we make with the man under arrest is to assume that because he is charged with some anti-social act he has forfeited all love for his family, respect for himself and the rights of others. We then compound the error and prostitute all hereditary or educational refinement in the man by forcing him to mingle and associate with the mental, moral, and physical scum of the earth, in a place sometimes not fit for animals and worse than most penitentiaries that prepare for the so-called hardened offender.

We then double compound the crime against society by robbing the innocent wife and children of the fruits of the labor of

the husband and father, and then we expect to reform this man without his confidence and co-operation.

When legislation or brutal treatment will eradicate evil from the lives of men, the same process should strengthen and increase their virtues, as vice is but the antithesis of virtue and both are creations of the human mind manifesting through the body in action; and we might as well attempt to legislate affection between husband and wife to prevent divorce, or declare war on all pianos expecting to eliminate ragtime music, as to undertake to regulate men's vices and virtues by legislation or punishment.

We may force a man into subjection, just as one nation may subdue another, but it will be a victory of force and arms and not of spirit, and the purpose of our effort is defeated; for that great universal law which provides that "each thing shall produce its kind" has never yet been defeated or set aside, so that when hate will produce love, or war will produce peace, we can plant thistles and harvest strawberries.

In the same ratio that we concentrate on the human side of this problem will we solve the economical question involved; and as there are approximately 100 jails to each penitentiary and 29 arrests for misdemeanor for each arrest for felony, the greatest opportunity for the social worker is, just as Dr. Hastings H. Hart says, in the jail.

It is in the jail that we have the opportunity to meet the misdemeanorant or felon when he first comes in contact with the authorities, and if the proper contact is made with him then, he can more easily be turned from a life of crime than if left to himself or the influences of his associates in jail.

In jail we will find the young boy whose parents live in another city or state, and he is so humiliated that he will not let them know of his predicament, so he is left to the tender mercies of the more hardened associates with whom he must mingle; while if a man were to go to the boy as a father or a brother and get him to open up his heart, many times he could be saved, not only from prison but from a life of crime.

It is in jail we find the young man who married in haste, with no conception of the responsibilities he assumed in his wedding vow, and as soon as the couple realize they must face parenthood, and their moonlight dances and pleasures must give way to the more serious problem of fatherhood and motherhood, they

rebel and in self-protection the young wife has the recreant husband arrested.

A few days in a cell, with the proper influences to guide him, will in a very large majority of cases not only settle in his mind that he cannot well shirk his duties, but in many cases he goes out with a better understanding of the responsibilities and pleasures of parenthood.

It is even in jail that the boy charged with the more serious crimes should be approached by some social worker who can show him that the successful man is not the one who never made a mistake, but the man who profits by his mistakes so that he does not make the same mistake twice; and that he can go to prison and be a man there, so that when he comes out he can take his place in society and be respected.

In many cases after the boy was returned to the jail with a heavy sentence we have persuaded him to go to prison and live there like a man, but not allow the prison to live in him.

It is jail work that will convince the social worker of the great need of a "public defender," as he will be called upon many times to stand between the prisoner and some shyster lawyer or some ambitious young attorney who is sure the case is so simple and easy that he can obtain a verdict of acquittal, even though the boy is guilty.

On the other hand, the attorney appointed by the court to defend the boy five minutes before the trial will urge the boy to plead guilty, though he may be innocent, promising to fix it with the judge to parole him; but in a large majority of cases this plan fails and the boy has branded himself a felon.

I recall a number of cases where, at the close of our classes in the jail, boys have asked for a private interview, and we advised them to go to the judge and "lay their cards face up on the table," which in many cases proved decidedly best for the boy, as the judge very often paroled the boy; and when the case was too serious to permit of parole, the boy felt better for having come clean and told the truth.

It is when the prisoner hears the big iron doors close and lock behind him for the first time that his heart cries out for a friend, and it is then that the social worker whose heart is in the right place and battling for humanity can make a contact with the prisoner that will accomplish more good than after the prisoner

has fought out those first conflicting emotions in his own mind and more than likely reached the wrong conclusions.

After the prisoner has become reconciled to his surroundings in the jail and his nerves have been racked by a public parade of his misdoings, during which time the prosecuting attorney has publicly declared to the world through the newspapers and to the judge and jury that the prisoner at the bar should be taken out and shot at sunrise to protect society, and the prisoner has been sentenced to prison, where he is to be isolated from the world and his loved ones for a term of years, it is too late for the social worker to do the most good, as the prisoner has been given to understand the world is against him and he must fight his battles alone. He has thus built a wall of mental reservations around himself that any social worker will find harder to penetrate than had the social worker made his contact with the prisoner in the jail before the prisoner was tried or convicted.

Some day society will realize that every economical and social problem is but the product of human error, and when the human phase of the question has been solved, the economical and social problem will dissolve.

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